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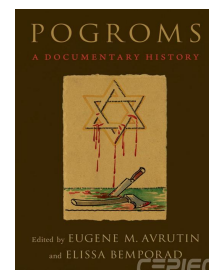
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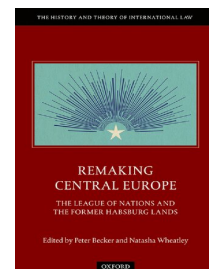
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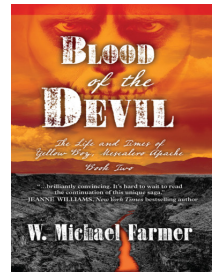
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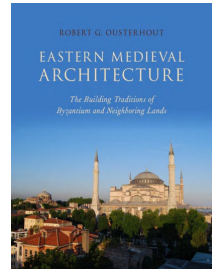
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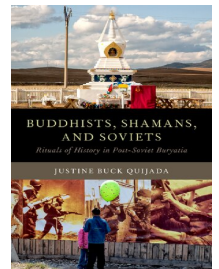
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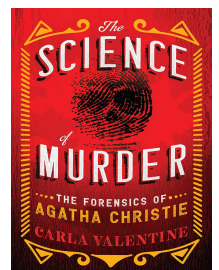
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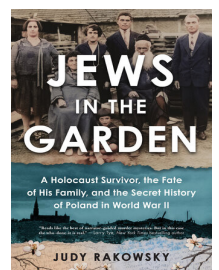
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the Lands of the Soviets

Elissa Bemporad

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Ai miei genitori, Nino e Donna, per aver sempre riso e sorriso

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A NOTE ON transliteration

In transliterating Russian, Ukrainian, and Hebrew I have followed the Library of Congress guidelines, but I have chosen to eliminate most diacritical marks and to present the names of famous personalities as they are commonly used in English (e.g., Leon Trotsky, not Trotskii; Dubnow rather than Dubnov). Yiddish words are transliterated according to the system established by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. I spell out the names of well-known personalities, such as Mendele Mocher Seforim, as they are usually spelled in English, without reference to the YIVO rules of transliteration. I identify place names with the spelling used at the time by the Soviets, but I always include the current spelling or changed name of the location as well (e.g., Proskurov, Proskuriv, Khmelnytskyi). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

INTRODUCTION

FROM BLOOD LEGACIES TO BLOODLANDS

Pogroms and blood libels constitute the two classic and most extreme manifestations of tsarist antisemitism. They were often closely intertwined in history and memory, not least because the accusation of blood libel, the allegation that Jews murder Christian children to use their blood for ritual purposes, frequently triggered anti-Jewish violence. Such events were and are considered central to the Jewish experience in late tsarist Russia, the only country on earth with large-scale anti-Jewish violence in the early twentieth century. Boasting its break from the tsarist period, the Soviet regime proudly claimed to have eradicated these forms of antisemitism. But, alas, life was much more complicated.

The phenomenon and the memory of pogroms and blood libels in different areas of interwar Soviet Union—including Ukraine, Belorussia, Russia, and Central Asia—as well as, after World War II, in the newly annexed territories of Lithuania, western Ukraine, and western Belorussia are a reminder of continuities in the midst of revolutionary ruptures. The persistence, the permutation, and the responses to anti-Jewish violence and memories of violence suggest that Soviet Jews (and non-Jews alike) cohabited with a legacy of blood that did not vanish. This book traces the “afterlife” of these extreme manifestations of antisemitism in the USSR, and in doing so sheds light on the broader question of the changing position of Jews in Soviet society.

One notable rupture in manifestations of antisemitism from tsarist to Soviet times included the virtual disappearance—at least during the interwar period—of the tight link between pogroms and blood allegations, indeed a common feature in the waves of anti-Jewish violence that erupted during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The synergy between the blood libel and

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the pogrom had become standard under Alexander III and Nicholas II, as anti-Jewish violence was usually sparked (or justified) by a missing Christian child allegedly taken by the Jews for ritual needs.¹ With few exceptions, under the Soviets the blood libel did not dovetail with the pogrom, and, at least during the 1920s and 1930s, public attacks and displays of violence against Jews receded. Some claims of Jewish ritual murder in the Soviet Union never went beyond rumor mongering, and many were followed by criminal investigations of varying intensity and duration.

The bulk of scholarship on antisemitism in the Soviet context has focused on top-down government policies. Although the state is an important player—and the stronger and more centralized the state and its infrastructure, the more unlikely was the eruption of spontaneous anti-Jewish violence—a bottom-up focus shatters the myth of a monolithic Soviet government and reveals the extreme diversity of the actors involved. These included central, regional, and local authorities. For Jews, full-fledged equality in the Soviet Union hinged more on central authorities than on local authorities. In confronting cases of blood libel accusations in a Soviet city, or cases about restitution of property that had been looted in the wake of the pogroms of the Russian Civil War (1917–21), Jews had a better chance of seeing their grievances met by turning to central authorities, who would curb the antisemitism of local authorities. Conversely, since the main actors voicing antisemitism were usually connected to local and regional authorities, Jews tended to ally themselves with central authorities for protection.

The choice of an alliance with the state, often made under extreme conditions and threats of violence, would bear profound consequences.² For one, it bolstered the idea of a Jewish propensity for communism. The Bolsheviks' validation of the legal emancipation of Jews, which allowed them to join the political system, and participate in the newly established socialist society without quotas or discrimination, further encouraged this notion. In the eyes of many Soviet citizens, the state was complicit in consenting to the unnatural and incomprehensible rise of Jews to new socioeconomic positions of power, of visibility, of responsibility.

The Jewish presence in the secret police, for example, was in many ways an offensive revolution in the accepted social order. To be sure, Jews were encouraged to enlist in the Soviet secret police (Cheka), or joined of their own will, in substantial numbers, for different reasons. These included their higher levels of literacy (a precious commodity in order to conduct an investigation), their loyalty (Jews could not be suspected of allegiance to tsarist Russia), the allure of opportunity (being a member of the secret police came

with privileges), and belief (not unlike many other Russians, Ukrainians, and Poles, many Jews were true believers in the Communist project).

But there was an additional key motivation that explains, at least in part, the high proportion of Jews serving in this institution, namely, the unprecedented anti-Jewish violence unleashed during the civil war. The violence that struck family members and friends encouraged many young Jews to join the Cheka.³ The prospect of taking revenge against the murderers in the pogroms drove many Jews to join the Soviet secret police during the Red Terror.⁴ In the words of a former Bundist, “It is no secret that we have members who were won over to the Party solely because the Soviet government does not carry out pogroms against the Jews.”⁵ Writing a few years after the civil war, Soviet Yiddish writer Itsik Kipnis captured the trauma and the choice driven by a desperate yearning for revenge: “[T]he older son enlisted as a volunteer in the Red Army. He could find no rest, and he could not understand why his father had been killed. He enlisted in the army promising that he would ‘do something.’”⁶

The assumption of a deep-seated Jewish propensity for communism was (and is) a prejudiced assertion.⁷ This book captures the burgeoning of the Judeo-Bolshevism narrative, which blossomed in the midst of the pogroms and at times came to merge with the blood libel trope.⁸ In the interwar period this narrative depended, at least in part, on the Bolshevik ban on antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence in those territories that since the late nineteenth century had become the lands of pogroms and blood libels. It was then reinforced by the extraordinary success story of Jewish upward mobility in Soviet society. In the midst of World War II, when faced with the choice between fascism and communism, Jews were left with very little wiggle room to be picky, and chose communism (the political entity representing it rather than the ideology) in the hope of survival. This assumption of a Jewish proclivity for communism survived even when in the postwar period the regime fundamentally revised its avowed intolerance of antisemitism and revisited its view on the place that Jews could occupy in Soviet society. In a large multiethnic geopolitical entity like the USSR, which came to be dominated by the Russian ethnic group, the Jewish minority tended to assimilate with the dominant language and culture of the empire, namely, Russian. In post-1945 Soviet-controlled Ukraine, Lithuania, as well as Communist Poland, for example, Jews came to be seen as agents of the colonial power, as proxies of the rule from Moscow. This view played into the widespread claim of Judeo-Bolshevism.

The “blood legacies” were made of genocidal impulses that erupted during the pogroms, of memories of anti-Jewish violence, and of the

recurring claim of Jewish ritual murder and its multiple permutations. They became a necessary component for the events that unraveled in the “Bloodlands.” It is difficult to fully grasp the dynamics of violence unleashed during World War II in the region of Eastern Europe, which comprised present-day Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, without integrating the historical violence and memories of violence that earmarked Jews. The blood legacies played a central role in the carnage of European Jewry and made the Bloodlands likely.⁹

The Legacy of the Pogroms

“It is impossible to imagine what happened here on Saturday, February 15, [1919]. This was not a pogrom. It was like the Armenian slaughter,”¹⁰ wrote a witness to the violence unleashed at the height of the Russian Civil War, in the city of Proskurov (Proskuriv, now Khmielnytskyi), located in the historic region of Podolia, on the banks of the Bug River. In just a few hours the members of the Ukrainian nationalist forces murdered more than 1,600 Jews. Deeming the violence unlike all previous waves of anti-Jewish pogroms, the witness could only compare it to the Armenian genocide, the systematic extermination of 1.5 million Armenians, at the hands of the Young Turks, which took place from 1915 to 1917 in the context of the collapsing Ottoman Empire. “I do not have the strength to describe the details of the slaughter,” he wrote; “Simply remembering it makes me lose my mind. This slaughter surpassed the violence of all the pogroms ever experienced by Jews.”¹¹

The events in Proskurov were part of an intense wave of anti-Jewish violence that erupted in more than nine hundred cities, towns, and villages throughout Ukraine, Belorussia, and southern Russia, as the main adversaries in the civil war faced each other from 1917, following the Revolution, to 1921, when the Bolsheviks defeated their enemies and gained a complete victory. The forces involved in this fierce conflict included the Red Army, which was led by the People’s Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, Leon Trotsky, and which engaged in a sacred war against all the enemies of Bolshevik power¹²; the White Volunteer Army, which fought for the reinstatement of the tsar and the return to monarchism, and which came to pose a mortal danger to the nascent Soviet regime in August 1918, with the advancement of Admiral Alexander Kolchak toward Moscow, and in the fall of 1919 when General Anton Denikin conquered most of Ukraine¹³ Symon Petliura’s Directory, the Ukrainian nationalist government, which strove to

gain control over the southwest region of the former Russian empire; the Polish Army, which in the context of the bloody Polish-Soviet war between the newly independent Poland and the Bolshevik regime took over most of the northwestern regions of the former empire; and, finally, a diverse group of anarchist peasant bands; these included the so-called Green Army, which disassociated itself from the ideology of the other combatants, but consistently resisted the Soviet grain requisition policies, and the anarchist bands lead by Nestor Makhno, which initially cooperated with local communist forces but eventually refused Soviet authority.¹⁴

Often carried out in military fashion, the pogroms of the civil war differed from the pre-revolutionary pogroms of 1881–82 and those of 1903–6 also because they took place in the aftermath of “The war to end all wars,” in the midst of new forms of extreme violence that tapered the inhibition to kill and witness murder. The violence was perpetrated by organized military forces, and not only by chaotic “bands of hooligans”; the scale of murder was unprecedented; it often involved the participation of previously peaceful and even friendly neighbors; and because of the conditions of civil war, extreme violence and murder became socially acceptable.¹⁵

The loyalties of thousands of Jewish communities on the Eastern Front were tested by the different armies fighting in World War I. Identified as potentially dangerous “enemy aliens” by the Russian Imperial army, Jews faced expulsions and deportations, and often looting and rape.¹⁶ In the wake of the unprecedented carnage and chaos that erased all vestiges of civil society, the Jews were caught up in the crossfire of the new allegiances at stake during the civil war. More than other minority populations, including the Mennonites, Jews became once again an easy target for violence. Caught at the juncture of a forceful exclusivist nationalism, on the rise since the late nineteenth century and at its peak during World War I, Jews were seen as interlopers in the different national bodies at danger during the war. They could be easily identified with those forces tearing at the heart of the nation’s fabric, of Russia, of newly independent Poland, and of a Ukraine striving for independence. The greatest hazard of course was Bolshevism. And regardless of their actual choice, in the imagination of many Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians, Jews morphed into vectors for spreading communism. The growing perception of Jews as compromised political actors in the context of the civil war encouraged the rumors about the Bolsheviks’ intention to launch an uprising lead by Jewish socialists.

In most Jewish settlements the pogroms typically coincided with the power vacuum left by the departure of one army and the onset of the next

occupation, as the crumbling of state power aggravated Jews' vulnerability.¹⁷ Recurrent reports and rumors of alleged Jewish disloyalty toward Ukraine or Poland and allegiance to the Soviets often triggered war pogroms in the former Pale of Settlement. In many ways this was also a continuation of the pre-1917 tsarist rhetoric of identifying the revolutionary movement with the Jews.¹⁸ Indeed thousands of young Jews, ostracized under the realm of Nicholas II, had opted to engage in anti-state activity as Jewish radicalism quickly crystallized by the early twentieth century. But while almost all Jews opposed tsarism, only a minority favored socialism. And those who came to favor socialism did so also as a result of the lack of alternatives in the politicization process of this exceedingly urban and literate minority: embracing Polish, Russian, or Ukrainian nationalism was hardly an option for Jews. In late Imperial Russia, for example, the term "patriot" had become synonymous with "rabid antisemite."

The fact that in 1918 Jews quickly established self-defense units to protect the communities under attack further intensified this no-win situation. Their assertiveness was perceived as a provocation, as a sign of potential disloyalty of a minority group that refused to behave obediently and submissively and which could therefore expect revenge in the form of pogroms. In different areas of the former empire, thus, Ukrainian, White, and Polish forces attempted to restore their moral order by punishing Jews for allegedly breaking out of social norms they considered standard for a minority.¹⁹ Petliura and Denikin haphazardly condemned anti-Jewish violence. But they were slow, at times deliberately so, in rebuking their troops. They saw the violence as a successful tactic to bond their all too divided troops against a common enemy. In other words, they resorted to "pogrom politics" to struggle against Bolshevik forces. If initially most Jewish parties supported the Central Rada of Ukraine, the political body of the Ukrainian People's Republic that existed from 1917 to 1918, the accelerated intensity of the violence against them eventually swayed them into seeking protection from the Red Army.

Red Army soldiers were not immune to perpetrating atrocities against Jews: many of them were moved by stereotypes of Jews as capitalist exploiters of the downtrodden proletariat. In the absence of a firm ideological conviction, some Red Army soldiers operated on the basis of the allure of looting, indeed an appealing temptation given the desperate conditions of war. If the Red Army shared responsibility in the anti-Jewish violence unleashed during the civil war, Soviet power was alone in condemning pogroms by their own forces and resisting targeting Jews for violence.²⁰ While Jews suffered economically and otherwise under communism, they came to support the Red

Army in action, and reluctantly chose the Bolsheviks because they killed relatively few Jews or stopped killing them altogether.

During the approximately 1,500 pogroms, which took place primarily in Ukraine, perhaps as many as 150,000 Jews were murdered,²¹ 300,000 Jewish children were orphaned, thousands were wounded and permanently disfigured, thousands of women were raped, and Jewish property was looted or destroyed in its entirety.²² Jewish historian Elias Tcherikower, who meticulously collected and recorded materials about these pogroms, defined the anti-Jewish violence of the civil war “one of the worse catastrophes that has ever shaken the fate of the greatest Jewish center in the world, . . . which was devastated, shattered into pieces, and broken in its economic foundation.”²³ And yet, despite the wealth of material available, the personal accounts, official reports, and statistics assembled by an array of different organizations and relief agencies active in situ at the time, the pogroms that took place in the territories ravished by the civil war are largely understudied.

Overshadowed by the Holocaust, and yet such a fundamental chapter to understand its wider implications, this history is not only largely absent from the narrative of modern Jewish history.²⁴ It is also not fully integrated into the study of the Soviet Jewish experience, into the study of the process of acculturation, assimilation, and Sovietization undergone by the second largest Jewish community in pre-Holocaust Europe. How did the pogroms of the Russian Civil War affect the choices made by those Jews who could not—or did not want to—flee the new regime in formation? How did the memory of the violence affect their identity and interact with the memory of pre-revolutionary anti-Jewish violence? What happened to the thousands of raped women who preserved in their memory the terror of their violation; how did they integrate this experience into their lives under Soviet power?²⁵ And how was this violence commemorated by the Soviet state and its citizens? How did this experience of trauma mark the choices made, for example, by Naum Gaiviker, a six-year-old boy at the time of the Proskurov pogrom, who remembered the soldier who threatened to cut off his head, and who saw “that over there were heads, over there were hands, over there were feet. And all of his friends were killed off. And he, just a boy, stayed alive. It tormented him his entire life.”²⁶

In answering these questions, this book captures the long-term impact of the trauma of the violence of the civil war on Soviet Jewry. On the one hand, the events of 1918–21 revived the memory of the pogroms of 1881–82 and 1903–6. On the other hand, this trauma left an indelible imprint on Soviet Jews’ relationship with the Bolshevik state, with their neighbors, and shaped

new communities of violence and communities of memory.²⁷ This experience remained a founding one for Soviet Jewry especially against the backdrop of a new society that saw the virtual disappearance of pogroms.

The Legacy of the Blood Libel

When the lifeless body of a three-year-old child was discovered in a provincial city in Soviet Russia, a Communist Party member turned with wrath to his Jewish neighbor and asked, “Why did you drink the little boy’s blood?” It was 1926, nine years after the Bolsheviks had launched their ostensible pledge to establish a modern, atheistic, and rational society without antisemitism. And yet the plausibility of a Jewish propensity to carry out ritual murder, the centuries-old false allegation that Jews murder Christian children to use their blood for ritual purposes, was voiced by one of the members of the vanguard of Soviet society. How was this possible?

As historian Jonathan Frankel has reminded us, this is not the right question to ask. Historians have erroneously focused on the gradual marginalization of the ritual murder charge over the span of the last 350 years, while overlooking the extraordinary vitality of this false myth in modern—as well as contemporary—history. Ritual murder should also be investigated in the context of the modern Jewish experience, as a by-product of modernization, as the outgrowth of the “dark side of modern times.”²⁸ And if the irrational is an essential ingredient of modernization, then the blood libel could surely become a factor in the hyper-rational, modern, atheistic society that the Bolsheviks strove to create.

While the blood allegation never became the archetypal expression of antisemitism in Soviet society, it still deserves close attention. First, its persistence under the Bolsheviks reveals that this accusation did not dissipate after the 1911–13 Beilis Affair, the most spectacular blood libel in modern Europe. The arrest and trial of Menachem Mendl Beilis, who was accused of killing a Ukrainian boy for ritual needs, and eventually acquitted on the dubious verdict that left room for much disbelief, was not the last blood allegation of the first half of the twentieth century in the territories of the former Russian Empire.²⁹ In fact, the claim of Jewish ritual murder remained an issue in Soviet society that both authorities and Jews had to deal with throughout the interwar period and into the early 1960s. Second, ritual murder accusations in Soviet society (which involved the intervention of local and central authorities, police investigations and trials) can be used as a canvas to explore neighborhood sociology, memory and habits

of violence, and reasons for the endurance and permutation of the accusation.³⁰ Third, overlapping with other religiously based traditional anti-Jewish accusations—such as the “Christ-killers” charge of deicide, or that of an existing anti-Christian conspiracy such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—ritual murder also came to intersect with the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism; namely, with the idea that Soviet communism was really part of a wider Jewish scheme to seize power.³¹

The accusations that Jews were at the head of atheistic communism and that they performed murderous religious rituals could easily interconnect at the juncture of political and socioeconomic upheavals. To be sure, ritual murder accusations mushroomed in combination with the realization that the Sovietization of society entailed the frightening end of established, familiar, cherished patterns of life, and included the rise of Jews to new places and forms of power.³² As in other contexts and time periods, even in the Soviet Union the blood libel echoed society’s collective insecurities, and was retained as a cultural code to articulate social crisis.³³ In other words, Jews provoked unease because they blurred borderlines and upset familiar pre-revolutionary categories.³⁴

The accusation of ritual murder lies at the core of the Western tradition of anti-Judaism, and the belief in this legend requires no evidence at all.³⁵ The alleged crime had never occurred. It was nevertheless deeply embedded in the popular consciousness of Christian Europe, and particularly rooted in the religious and literary output during medieval and early-modern times. The blood legend traveled efficiently through word of mouth, preserving its well-known tropes through folklore and anti-Jewish religious and (later) racial mythologies; and, from time to time, it was reinvigorated (or exploited) by modern media and mass politics.³⁶

The public accusation against Jews for the crime of ritual murder proliferated in Central and Eastern Europe during the early decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the majority of these claims of Jewish ritual murder never went beyond rumor mongering, many were followed by criminal investigations. And in some instances Jewish defendants were publicly prosecuted for the crime. But not under the Soviets. Unlike tsarist Russia, here the blood libel ceased to be politically and culturally acceptable.³⁷ Though the blood libel cropped up socially, the Soviets never held any trials against Jews accused of committing ritual murder.

Prosecuting a Jew for ritual murder would have neutralized the official struggle against antisemitism, which was launched in the midst of the civil war when Lenin avowed “to tear the antisemitic movement out

by the roots.”³⁸ Signed by Lenin on July 27, 1918, the decree on antisemitism was recorded on phonograph records and disseminated through the gramophones of the propaganda trains, played in workers’ clubs and at Party meetings.³⁹ In other words, the Bolshevik condemnation of antisemitism was clear-cut, categorical, and one of the most visible features of the new regime, maintained on the official level for all of Soviet history. And while Jews endured economic hardship (as a largely *petit bourgeois* element), persecution of their religion (alongside other religions), and the dissolution of their national movement (Zionism), they never forgot the debt of gratitude that they owed to Soviet power.

The Bolsheviks exhibited an impressive resolve in discrediting and stomping out the blood libel and prosecuted those who resorted to the accusation. From the start the regime dramatically and publicly repudiated the Beilis case. In an event of great symbolic significance, the Soviet authorities tried and executed the major figures involved in the Beilis trial (including the prosecutor, and chief “eyewitness”). Yet, ritual murder did not disappear in the Soviet context. The belief in Jewish ritual murder proved to be resilient, and it withstood the state’s attempts to uproot it. In many instances Jews were forced to actually face the claim of having killed ritually, like in 1926 when the Communist Party member assumed that his Jewish neighbor had consumed the little boy’s blood. More than other antisemitic myths, ritual murder aroused a deeply emotional reaction among Jews: it touched upon the question of belonging, addressed an allegedly inherent criminality, barbarism, and monstrosity, which in turn elicited a sense of danger and diffidence. The blood libel remained a source of fear and tension for Jews. In Jewish memory, any interaction with non-Jews could, under certain circumstances, evolve into an accusation of killing children, which in turn could spiral into a pogrom.

Which social groups then claimed Jewish ritual murder in Soviet society? When and why? Which factors and conditions triggered the accusations? Who were the purported victims and perpetrators of the crime? And which strategies did Jews employ to combat accusations of ritual murder, and to convince the Soviet state to intervene on their behalf especially when local authorities seemed to adhere to the resilient belief that Jews did indeed carry out the crime? In addressing these questions, this book considers the vagaries of the blood libel and the official responses to the accusation as barometers to measure the extent to which Jews reaped the promises of citizenship in Soviet society. To be sure, the recrudescence of antisemitism in the 1940s and early 1950s would make it more difficult for Jews to counter ritual murder accusation and to rely upon authorities for protection.

Of Course It's Not All About Antisemitism . . . and Yet . . .

Some scholars have warned against the dangers of focusing too much on the study of manifestations of antisemitism, including blood libels and pogroms.⁴⁰ It has even been suggested that we do away altogether with the terms “antisemitism” and “pogrom,” insofar as their unempirical nature impedes rather than facilitates a deeper understanding of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews and in general of Jewish history.⁴¹ But while the overdose of these terms might apply to the study of certain geopolitical contexts, it certainly does not relate to the study of the Soviet Union. Our understanding of popular antisemitism in the Soviet context, and our knowledge of the ways in which Bolshevik society responded to it, are—at best—sketchy and incomplete. Overly concerned with moving away from a Cold War-infused narrative of Jewish victimhood and silence, scholars (including the author of this book) have largely overlooked social antisemitism, eluding a much-needed nuanced approach.⁴² Earlier scholarship—even in its starkest anti-Communist expressions—conceded that there were no pogroms or blood libels in the Soviet territories, which in turn made the exploration of these themes redundant. This book shows otherwise.

There is an unexplored history of antisemitism in the Soviet lands that sheds light on the complicated experience of concurrent Jewish empowerment and vulnerability. As a belief that Jews have common repulsive and damaging qualities that set them apart from non-Jews, antisemitism was also a corollary of the Jewish proximity (real or imagined) to power. It also emerged from the crisis produced by compulsory industrialization and urbanization and the ensuing competition in the labor market. In this fertile ground for ethnic tensions, Jews were seen as stepping out of the clearly delineated boundaries within the social hierarchy. “Why are there so many Jews in Soviet institutions,” asked a Soviet citizen in 1927, and another one added “why do Jews control the state and the Party?”⁴³ Of course, the Bolsheviks knew that too much of a full-blown public campaign against antisemitism eventually ran the risk of sabotaging their efforts. While condemning it, Soviet authorities had to delicately untangle the popular assumption of a connection existing between Jews and Bolshevism. As a result, the state’s containment of and protection from antisemitism could never be impeccable, and persisted only as long as the shadow of Jewish power and secrecy did not upset the legitimacy and popularity of the new system. As we will see, following the directives from above, Jews and non-Jews alike were encouraged

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